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YEATS'S DISAPPOINTMENTS

Francis O'Gorman

William Butler Yeats is, distinctively, a poet of disappointment. That is, of course, a disappointing comment to make since it is, at least on the surface, hardly an obscure one. Yeats's histories of disappointment do not disappoint, even in miniatures:

Come play with me;
Why should you run
Through the shaking tree
As though I'd a gun
To strike you dead?
When all I would do
Is to scratch your head
And let you go. ("To a Squirrel at Kyle-Na-No," VP 359)

Such local disappointments—a squirrel's unsurprising disinclination to be friendly—are condensed versions, hints of the larger patterns, of intellectual, sexual, national, and aesthetic disappointment from which Yeats made the substance of his poetry. He was disappointed that his plans for recreating "the old foundations of life" through retelling of the ancient legends of Ireland failed, to his mind at least.¹ Such precious things became defiled by the passing dogs: the men who did not care and could see no point, no ancient ways. Yeats was let down by those who hated J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907); disappointed in the wealthy man who promised a second subscription to the Dublin Municipal Gallery; disappointed that Romantic Ireland was dead and gone; disappointed, if also proud, to be one of the last romantics. Yeats made of things that did not work out work itself.

"We live by Admiration, Hope, and Love," William Wordsworth said in the "Despondency Corrected" portion of *The Excursion* (1814).² But Yeats made poetry of hope's unfulfilled expectations, of the argument of a poet with a future that had not been realized as expected. Maud Gonne was a disappointment: a long erotic history without intimacy, mutuality, returns. To "disappoint" began in the late fifteenth century as an inversion, a reversal of that to which one had been "appointed." To disappoint was an act of dispossession.³ But Yeats's daughter Anne was, the poet hoped, to be possessed of qualities in a fight-back against that etymology. She was to believe, as "A Prayer for my Daughter" from *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921) phrases it, that "opinions are accursed" and in turn to be saved from the fate of the "loveliest woman born," Maud

Gonne, who had given away her beauty to popular folly (VP 405). Yeats's best parental blessing was to try to avoid disappointment, to appoint his daughter to the security of being unexceptional.

Disappointment is infrequently angry in Yeats. It is not motivating, either, for it inspires no attempts to essay again, to try once more, even to the palest extent of Samuel Beckett's "Fail again. Fail better."⁴ Yeats's eye is on a future that turns out differently from expected just as he is the narrator of histories that prove to take disappointing directions, to fail to follow the route that had been hoped. But it is easy to underestimate how far Yeats makes poetry not merely out of the narratives of disappointment but, so to speak, its textures. He is interested in what disappointment *feels* like and *sounds* like as it is read in, or through, poetry; how patterns of words do not merely describe or reflect on disappointment but, in the subtlest and most suggestive ways, effect it. Yeats—to confuse etymology—is a poet who has taken possession of disappointment and made aesthetic objects out of strange and thoughtful transformations of what, in the bluntest terms, are let downs. Yeats, certainly, allows his reader not only to read the routes of disappointment but to hear them, for his disappointments are not only part of his life but of poetry's relationship with time.

The child dancing in the wind in *Responsibilities* (1914) has, in Yeats's gloom, only disappointment to expect. Believing in disappointment, Yeats expresses surety about a future that is unlikely to—disappoint. Yet the ear may anticipate what does not—disappointingly—happen. Being young, this child has not known

The fool's triumph, nor yet
Love lost as soon as won,
Nor the best labourer dead
And all the sheaves to bind.
What need have you to dread
The monstrous crying of wind? ("To a Child Dancing in the Wind," VP 312)

"Wind" might not be /wind/ but /waɪnd/. Yet, such an archaic usage seems intrusive, awkward. The eye rhymes what the ear does not; a momentary verbal deflation is caught in the breeze for the anticipation of rhyme is met with an inexact match, a "nearly there but not quite," even as the poem is sure of what will come next to the child in the future. "Upon the brimming water among the stones" Yeats says in the titular work of *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919), another poem of expectation, "Are nine-and-fifty swans" (VP 322). In sound those birds are already out-of-place, for the ear might expect a clinching masculine rhyme for "stones" not a half-rhyme that is better seen than heard. Compare, for instance, the achievement of "Think where man's glory most begins and ends, / And say my glory was I had such *friends*" in "The Municipal Gallery

Revisited" from *Last Poems* (1936–9) (VP 604). The reader, subtly, has been groomed for dissatisfaction in rhyme's play with temporality, with the disappointments not of looking ahead but of hearing ahead.

At the close of "Coole Park, 1929" from *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933), there is another peculiarity conjoined with the disappointment of a non-rhyme (perhaps the modest achievement of a quarter-rhyme). The passing scholar, poet, or traveller must, in the future ruins of Lady Gregory's house, dedicate himself to recollection, to memorialization:

—eyes bent upon the ground,
Back turned upon the brightness of the sun
And all the sensuality of the shade—
A moment's memory to that laurelled head. (VP 489)

The answering chimes of alliteration—sensuality, shade, moment, memory—replace the absent acoustic coincidence of the last couplet in a line that, though it is the poem's climactic commemoration of Augusta Gregory and her great estate, contains another disappointment. All the glory of this "aged woman and her house" (VP 488)—here is a deliberately disappointing frankness of diction—reaches its culmination in an act of memory, a gesture, a celebration but only *for a moment*. The poem, rebuilding the past from an imagined future in words, moves towards the high point of its apparent task of memorialization only to surprise its reader with casual brevity at the apex of recollection. Remember, remember—but do not spend too much time about it.

Yeats announced that he had found the task of reviving ancient Irish legends a disappointment. There was more enterprise in walking naked. Starker language, plainer diction, in turn replaced the coat of many mythologies. In *The Wild Swans at Coole*, Yeats's disappointment in what that "mythological" language had achieved was arrestingly shaped in the plainest of terms, which obtained a peak in another "disappointing" line. In "In Memory of Alfred Pollexfen," the shaping was almost literal for the poem mimicked an epitaph, proposing words that might actually have been carved:

Five-and-twenty years have gone
Since old William Pollexfen
Laid his strong bones down in death
By his wife Elizabeth
In the grey stone tomb he made. (VP 360)

It is a touching realization that masculine and feminine endings rhyme together at the very moment Pollexfen is lain beside his wife. But plainness becomes rougher at the close of the poem where Yeats probes how both rhyme and

repetition conjure emptiness. With the unexpected turn of the poem to the same term, Yeats's lines end suspended between the bleak articulacy of ordinary monosyllables and the dissatisfaction of bleak ordinariness. "At all these death-beds," Yeats concludes

women heard
A visionary white sea-bird
Lamenting that a man should die;
And with that cry I have raised my cry. (VP 361)

The poet takes the repeating "cry" of the premonitory seabird, heard over and over again, and—repeats it. Peter McDonald, writing on the workings of rhyme in nineteenth-century poetry, sensibly says that Yeats's rhyme can create an effect of the "static" when rhyme and repetition become one.⁵ McDonald associates this habit with the final phase of a century-long argument about rhyme itself. But the static, the non-progressive, is more intimately part of Yeats's conjuring of impeded futures, foiled expectations, which characterizes his own peculiar conception of how poetry works through time towards points of disappointment. Sometimes rhyme can be a peculiar form of deflation. No synonym for "cry" will do, no other word serve instead, in a concluding line that drains the finality from the masculine rhyme of "die/cry" by making it happen too soon. Yeats's language is strategically disappointing even as it addresses the inevitability of death, the event that Edward Thomas, listening to the rain, remembers, exactly the year before, "Cannot [...] disappoint."⁶

Pulse raises expectations that are easy to subvert. Variation in rhythm is a poetic necessity, to be sure, but it can also provide another creative place for what might be called the verbal music of a let-down. In rhythmic patterns can suddenly be felt an absence, a missing step, or an additional beat that was not expected. In "The Lover Mourns for the Loss of Love" (*The Wind Among the Reeds*, 1899), Yeats's line dips:

I had a beautiful friend
And dreamed that the old despair
Would end in love in the end... (VP 152)

The regularity established in "Would end in love" falters, or thins, in "in the end." The ear's momentary expectation of a pattern is upset in the subtlest sense, a kind of somnolent overcoming of musicality in tune with Yeats's soundings of disappointment elsewhere. The rhythm, at however a micro-level, is stretched just as the words themselves are over-stretched, palely repeating "end" at the—end. Yeats deftly manages, too, to inhibit the finality of the word "end" simply by repeating it so that it seems to falsify its own meaning. This

is like Matthew Arnold struggling to say goodbye at the end of “Stanzas in Memory of the Author of ‘Obermann’” (1852) with that terminal line “A last, a last farewell!” where the meaning of “last” is undone as it is uttered, as if it cannot quite adhere to its own proposal.⁷

The title of “Sailing to Byzantium” (*The Tower*, 1928) offers words that, in a cognate way, play with a foiled expectation at the most refined level in a poem that, more generally, troubles the reader’s sense of what is moving forward, of whether the future is knowable, of what knowledge anticipation provides. Yeats’s title, the present participle, announces the dative, a movement *to*—perhaps echoing the magisterial first canto of Swinburne’s *Tristram of Lyonesse* (1882), “The Sailing of the Swallow,” which narrates Tristram and Yseult’s fateful return to King Mark and the drinking of the love potion. Swinburne’s present participle signifies poetry that represents a voyage both literally and into tragedy. Yeats’s “sailing” apparently promises motion as well: the poet moves towards Byzantium. But the text itself announces he is already there. He has “sailed the seas and come / To the holy city of Byzantium” (VP 408). What relationship with anticipation, then, does this poem actually have? Its title disappoints the text’s substance.

Yeats, incidentally, exploited the “disappointing” title elsewhere, not least in the same volume, using opening words to raise expectations that the text confounds or troubles, rendering our natural, inevitable, speculations at least at first unrevealing. I will return to another rich example at the end. But here, the most obvious instance in association with “Sailing to Byzantium” is “Meditations in Time of Civil War” (*The Tower*), which the unknowing reader might reasonably assume to be a set of overt meditations *on* the Irish Civil War, a war poem, a political analysis of Ireland in 1922 and 1923. Yeats’s oblique manner, his rhetoric of evasion, his primarily tangential analysis of Ireland during the war (and his disapproval of war poetry anyway), reveals that the first-time reader has not received exactly what he or she might have expected—indeed, first-time readers may well struggle to associate much of what Yeats says with the civil war at all.

In “Easter, 1916” (*Michael Robartes and the Dancer*), we find not disappointment in a title but something more akin to the reader’s experience of “The Lover Mourns for the Loss of Love,” an effect of uneven musicality conjoined with another moment of “disappointing” verbal repetition. The result is not unlike that version of the let-down that Eric Griffiths discusses in his 1997 Bateson Memorial Lecture at the University of Oxford on “The Disappointment of Christina G. Rossetti.”⁸ Griffiths’ concern there is with the emotional significance of “disappointing” repetition and Rossetti’s sometimes startlingly, disappointingly, unvarnished diction. Yeats, too, exploits the disappointment of the coincidence of words and of gestures to the demotic. “We know their

dream;" he writes of the republican heroes of the Easter Rising, MacDonagh and MacBride, Connolly and Pearse:

enough
To know they dreamed and are dead... (VP 394)

That has the same disarming candor of lexis as other moments in Yeats's poetry when we face a bare truth that cannot be hidden in fancy words; moments when poetry confronts the disappointing fact of the world that it cannot disguise. Take the startling, deflating example of Yeats's disappointment in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" (*The Tower*), when poetry appears to be confessing its own *inutilité*, its redundancy:

But is there any comfort to be found?
Man is in love and loves what vanishes,
What more is there to say? (VP 429–30)

For one bleak but almost funny moment, the reader may look back when reading these words on Yeats's long career as a poet in love to reflect, wryly, that there really has been a very great deal to say. (And it is an intriguing possibility that there is an intonational equivocation here. The words can be heard, though not read, as "love's what vanishes," unsettling the line with an ambiguity that largely, disappointingly, undoes it.) Yeats secures disappointment by telling his reader that poetry can offer unburnished, raw, truths that take away at the need for poetry, for words and images, for the very texts with which the reader is engaged when reading. And that candor transports the reader back to the "disappointing" words of "Easter, 1916." Yeats asserts, with bluntness, that the heroes of the Easter Rising "dreamed and are dead," a verbal sequence that offers the sparse unpicking, the stripping down, of "dreamed" into "dead" since "dreamed" contains in letters the future extinction it hoped to avoid.

Once, in "Broken Dreams" in *The Wild Swans at Coole*, Yeats's frankness—the kind of language vaguely called "unpoetic"—is bathos. And there is unselfconscious amusement too. We read not of beautiful lofty things but of a wholly unpredicted and prosaic defect in a woman's form:

You are more beautiful than any one,
And yet your body had a flaw:
Your small hands were not beautiful... (VP 356)

The blazon has the freshness of the "unpoetic": the first line is more like a commonplace note left in a pigeon-hole from a secret admirer, a Valentine's card. But the subsequent monosyllabic enumeration of the woman's surprising

fault—more beautiful than anyone, but with disappointingly small hands—is a let-down. And that very line, complaining about hands that are not beautiful, is hardly beautiful in itself. The lines as a whole dimly recall, perhaps, that equally surprising first encounter of Charles Bovary with Emma Rouault in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) when Charles, attending her father, notices the attractive whiteness of Emma's nails but her defective hand overall: "Sa main pourtant n'était pas belle, point assez pâle peut-être."⁹ Yeats offers his own version of this speaker at once provincial and discriminating, narrow and perfectionist, catching something of that same mixture of the exact and the limited that disappoints in finding fault with such minor disappointments. Yeats's speaker avoids the appropriately noble poetry that salutes a Helen of the present even as he sounds as if, in another way, he is writing it. And these lines about disappointment had followed, as it happens, another sequence of repetitions that create a further Yeatsian effect of read disappointment:

Vague memories, nothing but memories,
But in the grave all, all, shall be renewed. (VP 356)

Memories, memories; but, but; all, all: the lines promise renewals yet are made from the reused. Recollections of earlier words persist in this reflection on recollections as the poem struggles to move forward—even that "all, all" feels like another little rhythmic stumble, as if the line is not confident enough to do without nervous restatement, as if the term "all" oddly needs amplification but cannot be amplified except, blankly, by itself.

Yeats's repetitions leave words in a complicated relationship with linearity, with the *feeling* of the verbal advance of the poetry, because they involve recognition of language that is developing a thought even as it is not moving forward in an expected way. Here is a distinctive grammar of suspension. William Blake, writing innocently in "The Shepherd" from "Songs of Innocence" (1798), achieves something similar at a local level with those simple words: "How sweet is the Shepherdes sweet lot."¹⁰ Without contraries is no progression—and with repetitions there is not progression but stasis, the "development" of a poetic line by a dependence on things that are the same. Repetition confuses the passage of time even as we read through time. In "Easter, 1916," Yeats captures another form of stasis at the very moment, pointedly, his words plot alteration:

Minute by minute they change;
A shadow of cloud on the stream
Changes minute by minute... (VP 393)

Minute, minute, minute, minute: the words figure that which does not move forward on any stream as if, regardless of what Louis MacNeice would later say,

a river *can* be a river “which does not flow.”¹¹ The business of expectation in reading a poetic line, the reader’s implicit faith that there will be development, a movement ahead, a future in the words, is deftly contained by such language that moves forward through time only by not making the future new. And the most memorable cluster of words in the poem, “All changed, changed utterly” (VP 392), is but two sides of a tautology where sense does not advance but crosses backwards in a chiasmus to start again. That tautology, incidentally, recalls the similar effect in “Broken Dreams” where Yeats’s speaker will “Leave unchanged / The hands that I have kissed, / For old sake’s sake” (VP 357). That repeat—the sake of old sake—stalls change too in a poem that hopes, differently, for the unchanged. In “Easter, 1916,” the struggle is between the transformation recorded by the words and the troubled progress of the words, the difficulty language has in moving into a future. Verbally, all that is utterly changed is the word order in this avoidance in Yeats’s political commentary of what, exactly, the Easter Rising has done.¹² Both sides of the syntactic divide—the comma marks it—remain the same, a model of division entirely unlike the violent struggle in Ireland, the conflict of the assuredly separated.

Yeats trades with luminous images and with dim, imprecise gestures. “A poem is that species of composition,” said Samuel Taylor Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria* (1817), “which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth.”¹³ Pleasure not knowledge first; reward not information: poetry is achieved art primarily not confession or instruction or advice or facts, however important those are secondarily. As A. C. Bradley phrased a similar point on 5 June 1901 in his inaugural lecture as Oxford’s Professor of Poetry, poetry’s subject does not count for nothing, but it “settles nothing.”¹⁴ Yet sometimes Yeats steps further into Coleridge’s formulation than Coleridge might have envisaged. Yeats allows his reader to feel that poetry is so far from exact knowledge that it offers only the loosest of imprecisions. Yeats’s words can, through repetition, suggest the unwisdom of expecting poetic syntax simply to take a line forward; elsewhere Yeats reminds his readers that descriptive language might be peculiarly undescriptive. But what is really important about this relatively minor feature of Yeats’s descriptive habits is that it provides a clue to the most distinctive way in which his poetry works out its inventive, necessary *pas de deux* with disappointment, with the reader’s foiled expectation of what exactly poetry might be and do. And in “The Municipal Gallery Revisited,” two lines are a surprising combination of repetition and antonym, of the same and definitely not the same:

Wherever I had looked I had looked upon
My permanent or impermanent images... (VP 602)

That second line means, simply expressed, “All my images,” a kind of disappointing realization. The apparently exacting discrimination between the two forms of endurance is not narrow enough to be much discrimination at all—additional “clarification” creates redundancy, the consciousness of the unnecessary presence of words already anticipated in that “I had looked I had looked.”

But, prior to these “disappointing” lines, Yeats’s imprecision is achieved differently through an easily missed but not uncommon gesture that half reveals and half conceals. The gesture is particularly noticeable because it also occurs in the famous 1932 recording of Yeats’s reading of “The Lake Isle of Innisfree.” “I met her all but fifty years ago / For twenty minutes in some studio” (VP 602), Yeats says in “The Municipal Gallery Revisited.” But “some” is striking—or, rather, noticeable because it is not striking. It makes a reader want to reply “but *which* studio?” Only “some” studio, not this or that one? In the BBC broadcast—in some other studio—the poet had remarked, with the same vague gesture, that he remembered “the great English poet William Morris coming in a rage out of some lecture hall.”¹⁵ The indefinite article would have served: “a lecture hall.” “Some” narrows possibilities but hardly at all. It gives a misty impression that Yeats can remember more than “a lecture hall” but not exactly, or that he cannot concern himself with the precision of his own memory. Similar gestures linger, fuzzily, elsewhere: “A *sort* of battered kettle,” Yeats says in “The Tower” (VP 409); “I sought it daily for six weeks *or so*,” he notes in “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” (VP 629); “*Some* violent bitter man, *some* powerful man,” he remembers in “Meditations in Time of Civil War” (VP 418); “when I awake *some* day,” “The Wild Swans at Coole” concludes (VP 323); “Because to-day is *some* religious festival,” reads “Upon a Dying Lady” (VP 363), a poem that also includes “the Venetian lady / Who had seemed to glide to *some* intrigue in her red shoes” (ibid.). Some, some, some: Yeats’s poetry bypasses the exactness of registered experience with a conversation-like generality.

So why is this?

Yeats works imaginatively with what a reader might easily, uncritically, expect a poem to do, from the level of rhyme and syntax to the clarity of description. But there is a larger challenge, a different kind of disappointment in store for what a reader might assume from what is to come: there is a substantial question about nothing less than post-Romantic expectations for poetry readers in general. Whether it is following the growth of the poet’s mind, seeing into the life of things, knowing the fate of Keats’s spirit, or understanding that the world is fuller of invisible spirits than we knew, Romantic period poetry underlines—however Coleridge’s defining priorities are right—epistemological claims. Poetry *is* a way of knowing even if knowing is not primarily what it is about. Yet the assumption that poetry should reveal, that the poet’s knowledge or vision, should however inadequately be communicated in the

pleasurable language of poetry, is that which, provocatively, Yeats inventively disrupts in a habit that I have just echoed at the end of the last paragraph. Yeats is supremely the poet of questions. And unlike the question I posed, Yeats is interested in queries that baffle or confute: in questions that cannot be answered. The rhetorical question has a dual relationship with disappointment. In one sense, the distinctive achievement of such questions is to make a listener disappointed that there is nothing to say despite the apparent invitation to say it. The rhetorical question is a species of, so to speak, negative attainment; it has a particular kind of strength that resides in the inevitability, the predictability of the reply, which is so certain it need not be said. "Questions that do not require an answer," as G. G. Bradley's *Aids to Writing Latin Prose* (1884) phrases it, "but are only put in the form of a question in order to produce a greater effect [...] are called rhetorical questions."¹⁶ "You are interested in money," said to the blackmailer or the estate agent, is more pointedly phrased: "I take it you are interested in money?" That is Bradley's "greater effect." The listener or reader already knows the answer so there is no place for wondering. We are told what to think—or, rather, not to think. That quieting of thought, the way in which mental speculation is invited then brought to a standstill, is Yeats's most characteristic effect in his contemplation of the limits of the mind. Here is the most provocative experience of disappointment in Yeats's poetry.

Helen Vendler remarks that poets "think" in different ways to logicians. Of course that is true. More exactly, Vendler says of Yeats that he "thought" through images: he pursued "the process of thinking by substituting for a second-order philosophical argument a montage of first-order images which supplement, or in some cases replace altogether, discursive statement."¹⁷ Images stand in or replace "logical proposition." But it seems to me that Vendler is thinking around rather than about what Yeats really does. For reading Yeats does not involve merely the *replacement* of "logical thinking" but the experience of finding "logical" thought both invited and then impeded. It is a tougher and more confrontational process than Vendler implies where disappointment is a pertinent feature of the way in which Yeats creates expectations that are not fulfilled. Readers do not have to read a poet "thinking" differently from a logician: with Yeats, struggling with the balloon of his mind as it bellies and drags in the wind, readers may distinctively feel that the mind has been called on and then—packed away.

"One had a lovely face," Yeats writes in "Memory" in *The Wild Swans at Coole*:

And two or three had charm,
But charm and face were in vain
Because the mountain grass
Cannot but keep the form
Where the mountain hare has lain. (VP 350)

It is possible to conceive a number of vague paraphrases of what this conjunction of a natural image and an enumeration of lovely or charming faces might mean. Is Yeats's argumentative point here that memory, somehow, is a more enduring feature of a person than their appearance or personality? It is hardly much of an idea and feels unequal to the pleasure of the poem. Analyzing, paraphrasing like that exhausts or diminishes the text: the eloquence of the mountain hare on the grass fades if its translatable "meaning" is doggedly—so to speak—brought out. Yet Yeats has sprung a trap because what is momentarily expected, seemingly promised, *is* logical thought, the sequence of logical connection. Charm and loveliness are "in vain / *because...*," Yeats says. "I ate the biscuits *because* I was hungry;" "I was driving too fast *because* I was late:" "because," its etymology rooted in causality as "by-cause," is the pivot on which a logical explanation turns. The word is an earnest of a coming reason: why something happened, why something matters, why someone did what they did. Yet not here. Yeats invites his reader to feel let down, to realize that poetry can deploy the tools of thought, the tempting promise of "because," only to confute it by declining to provide what was apparently assured. Thinking is apparently asked for only so the reader can realize that reason is not the way to apprehend the charm of Yeats's image and whatever thing it is the emblem of.

Questions have related though not identical effects. Sometimes, Yeats poses inquiries—he is among the most questioning, in a literal sense, of all poets in English—which are plainly unanswerable and the reader must face a kind of blankness, a mental void, in considering what cannot be solved by thought. "Do you not hear me calling, white deer with no horns?" the poet asks at the beginning of "He mourns for the Change that has come upon him and his Beloved, and longs for the End of the World" (VP 153). Readers cannot know what to "say" in response to that because they have overheard an inquiry neither directed at them nor admitting of any knowledgeable answer. What *does* the white deer with no horns know? Gently pushing the reader to sense the borders of comprehension and the limits of where thinking begins and ends, Yeats makes of the question a grammatical form that invites thought in ways that thought cannot deal. Who, exactly, "dreamed that beauty passes like a dream?" ("The Rose of the World" VP 111); where *is* the painter's brush "that could show anything / Of all that pride and humility?" in "The Municipal Gallery Revisited" (VP 602); among what rushes *will* those swans build after Yeats has found them flown away? Here is knowledge beyond reach even though the poet sounds as if someone knows it.

Questions encourage a reader to apprehend the presence of what is not and cannot be comprehended, the occult answers beyond grasp, off the edge of the mind, off the edge of the world. Elsewhere, Yeats more complicatedly proffers inquiries that might or might not be rhetorical questions that more deeply

it could loosely be said that there is “potential” for both answers, for yes and no. But the two answers jostle with each other and cancel each other out, so that the reader is left not with a sense of potential but of stalemate. The poem blocks one possibility with another. Yeats brings his reader to the edge. He asks a question of a myth that only a prophet, a miraculous mind, could answer. The disappointment of Yeats’s question hints, momentarily, at imprecise and mysterious ways of knowing, of magical powers that can grasp truths beyond the range of human cognition. Poetry does not tell us *what* we cannot know but allows us to feel *that* we cannot know it.

In Judeo-Christian history, the first question is that of the serpent in the Garden of Eden who asks of Eve: “Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?” (Genesis 3:1, KJV). Aptly, the first question in Biblical history commences the disastrous path to the acquisition of greater knowledge that is the curse of humankind. A question is a way of searching for enlightenment—ingeniously or disingenuously. And for Genesis, with all its anxiety about knowing, the question, first of all, is about gaining unlawful, improper, comprehension. Yeats’s rhetorical questions (or questions that might be rhetorical) probe the shadows not of unlawful knowledge but of that which remains temptingly beyond the ordinarily human. We are amid the domains of understanding that merely thinking minds cannot reach. Yeats’s disappointments concern looking, hearing, and feeling ahead as much as they involve, too, the foiled expectation of what knowledge poetry might give. This writing peculiarly exposes the permanent truth that reading poetry itself is a form of guessing, of anticipation—however fuzzy or unselfconscious—involving what the reader *thinks* is going to happen. There is imaginative, aural, and intellectual speculation in reading Yeats’s most characteristic verse that is, peculiarly, uniquely, dependent on the unfulfillment of what a reader easily takes to be a promise. Reading Yeats I sense exactly how, in the act of reading poetry, I cannot know of what is to come.

Notes

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1. From W. B. Yeats’ “Introduction” to Lady Gregory, *Gods and Fighting Men: The Story of the Tuatha de Danaan and of the Fianna of Ireland* (London: Murray, 1904), xxiii.
2. William Wordsworth, *The Excursion: A Poem* (London: Moxon, 1853), 142.
3. See *OED*, “disappoint,” v., 1: “To undo the appointment of; to deprive of an appointment, office, or possession; to dispossess, deprive.” The first usage is given as 1489.

4. Samuel Beckett, *Nohow On: Company Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove, 1996), 89.
5. Peter McDonald, *Sound Intentions: The Workings of Rhyme in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 15.
6. Edward Thomas, "Rain" in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1936), 66. The poem was written on 7 January 1916.
7. "A" [Matthew Arnold], *Empedocles on Etna, and Other Poems* (London: Fellowes, 1852), 184–95 (195). For the significance of this Arnoldian repetition, see Francis O'Gorman, "Matthew Arnold and Rereading," *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 41 (2012), 245–61. There is a valuable recent account of Yeats' prosody in relation to the passage of time—which concentrates on revision and recollection—in David Ben-Merre, "The Brawling of a Sparrow in the Eaves: Vision and Revision in W. B. Yeats," *Journal of Modern Literature*, 31 (2008), 71–85.
8. See Eric Griffiths, "The Disappointment of Christina G. Rossetti," *Essays in Criticism*, 47 (1997), 107–42.
9. Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Moeurs de province* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1857), 23 ("her hand was not beautiful, perhaps not pale enough").
10. See the MS version, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, copy B, 1789, 1794 (British Museum, London) [http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=songs ie.b.illbk.11&java=no](http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=songs%20ie.b.illbk.11&java=no) (last accessed 19 January 2017). There is a recent conceptually sophisticated account of Blake and the idea of progression in Russell Prather, "William Blake and the Problem of Progression," *Studies in Romanticism*, 46 (2007), 507–40.
11. "[...] no river is a river which does not flow," Louis MacNeice, "Autumn Journal" (1939) in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1966), 102.
12. The calibrations of political meaning in this poem in relation to dates of publication are shrewdly analyzed by Matthew Campbell in "Dating 'Easter, 1916,'" *International Yeats Studies* 1.1 (2016), Article 7, available at: <http://tigerprints.clemson.edu/iys/vol1/iss1/7>, last accessed 19 January 2017.
13. S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, Or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* ([1817] London: Dent, 1906), 164.
14. A. C. Bradley, *Poetry for Poetry's Sake: An Inaugural Lecture* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1901), 15. The intellectual context of this lecture is adroitly discussed by Nicholas Shrimpton in "Bradley and the Aesthetes," *Essays in Criticism*, 55 (2005), 309–31.
15. For the recording, see http://www.openculture.com/2012/06/rare_1930s_audio_wb_yeats_reads_four_of_his_poems.html (last accessed 19 January 2017).
16. G. G. Bradley, *Aids to Writing Latin Prose with Exercises* ([1884] London: Longmans, Green, 1902), 144. Note the citation for *OED*, "rhetorical," 4.
17. Helen Vendler, *Poets Thinking: Pope, Whitman, Dickinson, Yeats* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 8.
18. The unrevised lines, not comprising a rhetorical question, read "Although the rushes and the fowl of the air / Cry of his love with their pitiful cries" VP, 277.
19. Bernard McKenna, "Violence, Transcendence, and Resistance in the Manuscripts of Yeats's 'Leda and the Swan,'" *Philological Quarterly*, 90 (2011), 425–44 (425).